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From Enabling People to Enabling Institutions. A national policy suggestion for inner areas coming from an action-research experience

Laura Saija¹ and Giusy Pappalardo²

^{1,2} DICAR, Department of Civil Engineering and Architecture, University of Catania
laura.saija@unict.it

Abstract. The paper focuses on the challenges faced by planners committed to quality of life in ‘inner areas’ (i. e. distant from major urban poles and often affected by the decline of population, public services, economic performances, and/or ecological integrity). It presents research findings developed by a long-term action-research partnership between planning researchers at the University of Catania and the ‘Simeto Valley’ community, in Sicily (Italy). These findings show that an important developmental role can be played by collaborative relationships between Institutions and the active part of their constituency, but only under the condition of a clear ‘enabling’ strategy not only targeting citizens but also institutions.

Keywords: inner areas, capability approach, institutional learning.

1 Introduction

In 2013, Italian Ministries officially agreed on a new development strategy dedicated to ‘inner areas’, i. e. a significant investment of public resources in areas distant from major urban nodes and, often, suffering from the simultaneous decline of population, public services, economic performances, and/or ecological integrity. This *National Strategy for Inner Areas (Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne, SNAI* from now on) was a new call for public action for the benefit of communities that had been left alone for a long time. When this happened, the authors had already been working, for more than five years, in one specific inner region, the Simeto Valley, located about 50 km east of the Sicilian Eastern coast, in Southern Italy, facing many of the issues raised by the SNAI. Our action-research work, developed in partnership with a network of local organizations and hundreds of residents, had already produced a strategic development plan, dozens of signature projects and a shared governance infrastructure, all in line with the content of the SNAI. So much in line that it seemed natural to “knock at the Government’s door” asking for attention. We’ve had that attention, since a portion of the Simeto Valley was indicated in 2014 as one of the two Experimental Areas of National Significance within the SNAI framework. The journey through which this indication has become into the official implementation of the SNAI in the Valley has been a long one, full of lessons that we believe are worth sharing within the planning scholarly debate on the matter.

2 The people-institutions relationship: a scholarly debate

This paper draws from our Simeto experience and develops a specific perspective on the role of collaborative relationships between institutions and the active part of their constituency in the development of inner regions. Planning scholars have debated at length on such an issue with arguments that differ on the basis of the various interpretations of what is a public institution and what kind of planning responsibilities it holds.

Whether or not one agrees on the Hegelian idea that various forms of social organization needs to dissolve and trespass into State Authority, we can all agree on the importance of National States in the European social organization. Inspired by Rousseau's theory on social compact, most European national constitutions give birth to public institutions that are based on a balance between the protection of negative rights (those already available in the state of nature, freedoms) and the provision of positive or civil rights (those *not* available in the state of nature). According to this legal framework, European citizens hold their Administrators accountable not just for the protection of their property rights, public safety, the right to free speech, but also for delivering high quality public education, affordable housing, public health care, etc. As a consequence, all European spatial Planning systems, despite their differences, consistently conceive spatial planning as "the methods used *largely by the public sector* to influence the future distribution of activities in space" (European Commission, 1997, p. 24, authors' emphasis). In particular, public planning is responsible not only for governing private spatial actions through police power, but also for shaping what scholars call 'the public city' (Di Biagi 1986, Bianchetti 2008), i. e. the spatial translation of the need for a roof to every family, a seat in the neighborhood school to every kid, enough public space for social interactions and mobility, etc. These were at least the foundations of the planning enterprise, which, however, have been facing significant criticisms.

Many planning scholars have criticized traditional institutional planning and devoted significant attention to extra-institutional, participatory, community-based, bottom-up approaches. Critiques come from at least two opposite directions.

On the one side, there are the liberal arguments born in the 60s, when social movements began criticizing institutional rational planning for being blind to needs of the powerless and scholars started to seek ways of practicing the planning profession outside city hall in support of communities oppressed by "unfair" officials (Davidoff 1965, Goodman 1971, Crosta 1973). From there, several scholars have contributed to a planning theory debate on the need to change the very nature of institutional practices, making them more permeable to citizens' contributions to decision-making (Arnstein, 1969, Fisher & Forester 1993, Innes & Booher 1999), co-production of spatial practices (Albrechts 2012), and collaborative management of common goods (Ostrom 1990, Rydin & Falleth 2006).

On the other side, there are arguments coming from a quite different political reasoning, with little connection with the social justice values: those of the neoliberals that favor welfare privatization and want governmental responsibilities limited to the protection of freedoms. From their perspective, community-based planning comes out

of the right (*freedom*) of citizens to take care of themselves without the need of paying taxes to an authoritarian government (Saija et al. 2020).

The second argument is gaining terrain against the first one within the current push in European politics toward austerity (cutting back public expenditure; Blyth 2013), entrepreneurial public institutions (Harvey 1989), and a weakening of the post-war welfare systems. The planning consequences are relevant (Tulumello et al. 2020): while strong private actors have increasing influence over decision-making, the production of ‘public spaces’ is increasingly going out of fashion and labeled as ‘too expensive’. Public services are therefore systematically handed over (with lots of subsidies!) to the private sector and participatory planning is often used by neoliberal populist decision makers as a ‘post-political’ device (to provide the illusion of inclusiveness while neutralizing political dissent; Swyngedow 2010). In sum, the rhetoric of citizens’ engagement is currently contributing to a decline of our public institutions’ ability to fulfill their constitutional responsibilities.

The debate on the planning relationship between public institutions and people takes a specific form in the case of ‘inner areas’. Here, traditional spatial planning, based on public-led redistributive strategies, cannot be fully applied, since there is very little to be re-distributed (shrinking real estate markets). New ‘neoliberal’ strategies, relying on private investments trickling down wealth for all, are also not an option, since there are not really many investors around. As a consequence, the blaming against technocratic institutions fades in the face of the proximity between small constituencies and their elected officials: as matter of fact, it is very likely that, in communities made of few hundred souls, every citizen has a relative or a close friend inside city hall. The same proximity characterizes inner areas’ private sector, made of small struggling entrepreneurs that would be hard to depict as ‘strong neoliberal forces’. Here collaboration between civic groups and institutions is the only way to evolve toward the future.

Not surprisingly, then, the SNAI draws heavily from this idea of systematic collaboration between public institutions and active, competent, interested citizens, organizations, civic actors, etc. In the background, there is Sen and Nussbaum’s theoretical framework (1993) known as the capabilities approach. In their capital work on the concept of quality of life, they argue for the need to reconnect the concept of development with the one of welfare, which are traditionally perceived as antithetic (you either fund economic development, i. e. entrepreneurs whose success will trickle down to everybody, or public services for the poors). Quality of life has to do with living in a nurturing society, one that “enable people to live full and creative lives, developing their potential and fashioning a meaningful existence” (Nussbaum, 2011; p. 185). This implies both innate capabilities as well as the ones that are developed through social interactions, education, political participation, etc. This perspective differs from the perspective of the self-made man at the basis of neoliberal development models, since it charges public institutions with responsibilities for the specific provision of those services and opportunities that allow capabilities’ development. It differs from the traditional welfare model, based on a paternalistic approach to service provision, due to the central role played by people’s active role in defining their space of self-fulfillment. This approach has heavily influenced the practice of social work and community development, especially within the field of

international cooperation (Nussbaum 2011). The SNAI clearly draws from such a premise (Barca 2009) when, on the one side, provides resources to local institutions aimed at enhancing public services while, on the other, requiring them to move beyond the idea of ‘helping’ traditional passive beneficiaries. The SNAI asks local administrators to actively work with local actors in order to shape Area Strategies, i. i. e. place-based development strategies (Barca at 2012) made of strategic actions for the growth of capabilities. These actions are imagined as heavily co-produced and co-implemented by institutions and active citizens, following what is today known as the social innovation paradigm (Ciampolini 2019).

From a planning perspective, the SNAI represents a very advanced effort to overcome the controversy whether or not ‘engaging people in decision making’ weakens or not public institutions. Within the SNAI framework, if you deal with ‘dying regions’, where institutions are very weak and both people and businesses are resourceless, the relationship between people and their public institutions is a highly fertile place to start from. Probably the only one.

3 Research approach and context

This paper shows discusses the potentials and the challenges of community-institutions collaboratives, on the basis of lessons learned in one single action-research experience carried out in the Simeto River Valley, Eastern Sicily (Italy), by a partnership between planning researchers at the University of Catania, local grassroots organizations, and local administrators.

The research approach called *action-research* is based on the assumption that, especially for applied disciplines like planning, scientific knowledge on how to address the most pressing social challenges can be generated *while* researchers are actually directly involved in action (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller 2014; Saija 2016). Scholars mostly agree on the fact that action-research can only be conducted by highly reciprocal partnerships between professional researchers and individuals and/or organizations with a stake in the research outcomes, where reciprocity means that professional and non-professional researchers are both co-researchers, sharing all research and action responsibilities (Whyte 1991, Reardon, 2006). The development of research through action means that: partners agree on a set of research questions of common interest, develop research that is immediately applied and evaluated. Evaluation outcomes are used to reframe the questions so that more research is carried out and applied for a second try. This is a cyclical process that can be repeated several times before knowledge is proved to be highly applicable and effective through the evidence that the world has been ‘intentionally’ affected.

This is the approach that we have experimented in the Simeto Valley: starting in 2007, with an informal partnership with local activists aimed at protesting the unsustainable model of development leading local decision-making¹, we have used

¹ The process began with an open conflict between Simeto activists and administrators caused by the proposal of building a mafia-owned incinerator in the Valley, which eventually evolved into a large social mobilization that led to a large community coalition committed to sustainable development (Saija, 2014),

action-research to develop a formal partnership between not just individuals but institutions: in 2015, the University of Catania, 10 Simeto municipalities and an umbrella organization grouping single citizen and community organizations called “*The Participatory Presidium of the Simeto River Agreement*” (the *Presidium* from now on) have officially endorsed a collaborative framework called the *Simeto River Agreement* (the SRA from now on). The SRA contains two innovations. The first relates with a new shared-governance system that directly engages Presidium and University representatives in decision-making for development (more details in [Saija 2016](#); [Pappalardo 2019](#)).

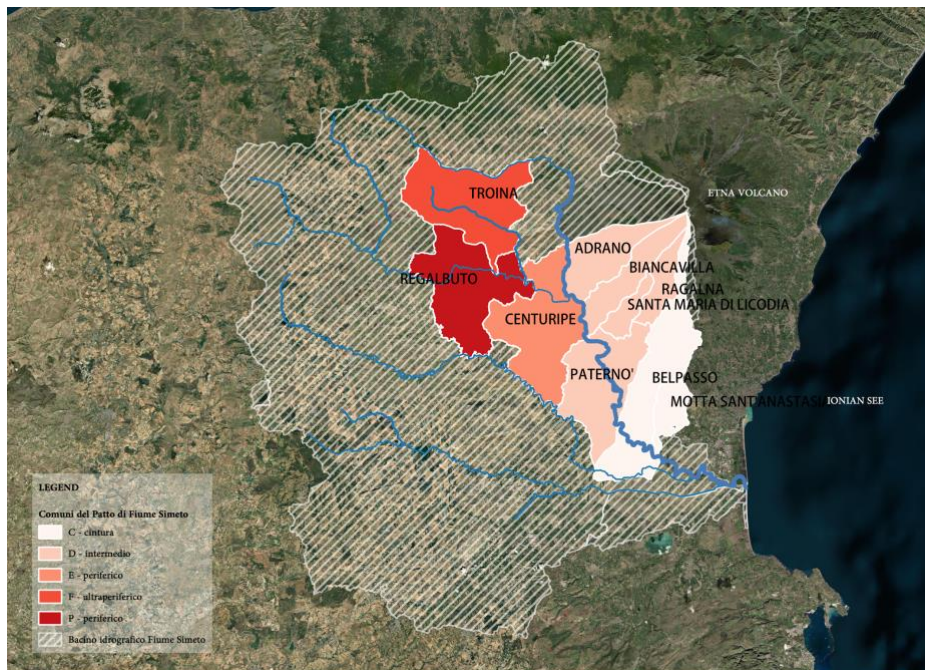


Fig. 1 – Municipalities endorsing the Simeto River Agreement, classified by the National Strategy of inner areas (darker reds indicate more “internal” municipalities).

The second innovation relates to its development approach, since it is based on a cultural and functional re-connection with the Simeto River ecosystem. The River runs around the southern slope of the Volcano Etna, toward the eastern coast of the island of Sicily. It is fed by the largest amongst the Sicilian hydrological basins (4186 km²). The so-called Simeto Valley encompasses the river’s upstream section and hosts a population of about 160,000 units residing mostly within a dozen of small towns immersed within a rich rural area. Towns’ historic and cultural roots are deeply linked to the river and its resources. As a matter of fact, since the Neolithic age, humans have decided to build their settlements at the bottom at the volcano, taking advantage of its solid ground and the proximity to the fertile alluvial plane as well as the abundance of natural water springs. After WWII, the rich rural productive system encountered the modernization paradigm, which generated changes in the landscape through wetlands

remediation and hydraulic regimentation, industrialization of agriculture, and the rise of monoculture. The SRA wants to counteract this model and focuses on the circular economy paradigm applied to the agricultural sector.

Today, local communities are facing most of the socio-economic and ecological challenges identified by the SNAI. The population decreases, median incomes are more than 20% less than the regional average and almost half of national average (see table 1), while youth unemployment rate exceeds 50% and most young people decide to leave for good². Critical socio-economic conditions are paired with ecological distresses³ not to mention a significant influence of the mafia over profitable economic activities (Saija, 2014; Armiero et al., 2019)⁴.

Table 1. Basic demographics (source: authors' elaboration of ISTAT data)

	Simeto Valley	'inner' Simeto municipalities	Sicilian Region	Italy
population 2012-16	-0,5%	-1,1%	-0,2%	0,0%
median income 2016	7.196,4	6.744,0	9.120,0	13.900,0

In line with the picture depicted by data, in our own experience we have witnessed dozens of individual stories of youth moving north not as a deliberate choice but as the only way to live in dignity, of elderly that struggle to get the services they need, of school teachers frustrated for school buildings falling apart, etc. Most of these issues are meant to be addressed by the SRA and were also the very first reason the Simeto action-research partnership decided, in 2013, to apply to the SNAI. In 2014, this led to the selection of the Valley as an Experimental Area of National Significance⁵ and the approval, in 2018, of the Simeto Area Strategy. The Strategy's focus on public services are meant to complement the SRA's focus on community development and it is expected to bring about 30 mln Euros of public investments by the end of the 2014-2020 period. Such an accomplishment has not occurred easily and the challenges we have experienced we believe are relevant for the debate summarized in the previous paragraph. In what follows we explain why.

² In Sicily, from 2012 to 2017, the % of emigrant young graduates - 25/39 years old - grew dramatically from 21% to 28.2% (source: ISTAT-BES, 2018).

³ The most relevant ecological distress is connected to hydrological risks. For instance, 5% of Centuripe's land (900 ha) is classified as hydro-geologically unstable by the Sicilian Region (source PAI, 2014).

⁴ For example, the critical conditions of the increasing number migrants (+281,8% between 2001 and 2011; ISTAT 2011) are often related to their illegal exploitation as rural workers by the *caporalato* (rural organized crime (see the "CGIL Flai CGIL Union" documentary called *Terra Nera*, produced in 2015).

⁵ While Regions were supposed to select pilot areas, the SNAI national committee was able to select a small number of 'areas' characterized by collaborative administrators and constituencies where they wanted to experiment the SNAI through a highly participatory approach. In this perspective, the shared governance structure embedded in the SRA made the Simeto Valley a good fit (Saija 2015; Carrosio et al. 2018; Pappalardo 2019)

4 The SNAI experience of the Simeto Community

The first challenge in the SNAI process came out of the fact that, for technical reasons, only three of the 10 Simeto municipalities were chosen as ‘SNAI project area’, which led administrators to interpret the SNAI and the SRA as two separate journeys. On the one side, SNAI and SRA documents made explicit reference to each other and the application of the SRA shared-governance system for the preparation Simeto SNAI Strategy, this wasn’t obvious for local administrators.

During the *first phase of Strategy Drafting (2015-2016)*, the participatory methods applied during the drafting of the SRA (Saija & Pappalardo, 2018) were not fully replicated and the outcomes of public assemblies and thematic workshops were only partially embedded in final documents. In the face of a tangible public funding opportunity, local administrators had gone back to their comfort zone, relying on the advice of consultants in order to make efficient decisions on how to ‘slice the cake’. The outcome was a draft version of the “Preliminary Strategy” that was heavily criticized by the National and the Regional boards that jeopardized the ability of the Simeto community to obtain funds through the SNAI. The Presidium used a variety of strategies – including open protest and a controversial media campaign – to open up the conflict and push administrators for a change of direction.



Fig. 2 – A community meeting in the context of an abandoned train station in Paternò, one of the commons that is currently managed by a Presidium affiliated organization (courtesy of S. Ferlito).

By the end of 2016, administrators agreed on putting *the drafting the Final Strategy (second phase)* under in the hands of a steering committee composed not only by mayors, deputy mayors, and their consultants but also Presidium and University representatives (a replica of the SRA shared-governance structure). For almost two years, the committee worked closely with the national board and involved relevant stakeholders in the co-design of projects for a successful Final Strategy, approved in 2018, that calls for a permanent steering committee as well as participatory implementation and monitoring of every project. During this phase, single administrators who had acted ‘very autonomously’ in the first phase, acknowledged, both privately and publicly, the lessons learned through the SNAI on the importance of collaboration between public institutions and community activists.

Right after the approval, though, a change of all the three SNAI mayors – mostly at their last electoral mandate – put in charge of *implementation (third phase; on-going)* new representatives who have not ‘re-convened’ the steering committee and are disattending, not without an open conflict with the Presidium, the collaborative nature of the Simeto SNAI Strategy.

Beside all the obvious comments on how hard but also rich collaboration could be, this experience calls for a more in-depth reflection on what is needed to develop productive collaborative frameworks for public institutions and community organizations committed to socio-economic development. Despite the ten years of work and all the good premises embedded in official documents, the Simeto community has not still learned how to do it. Looking at public institutions, where the resistance to collaboration seems to be higher, important lessons have occurred at the ‘people’ level – i. e. individual mayors, appointed officials, etc. – but not at the organizational one. The process has not yet produced structural change in the ‘institutional’ engine. In this perspective, as action-researchers, presidium members and university researchers are now reflecting on a potential strategy to reshape a new course of action-research that is more directly aimed at ‘deep and structural institutional learning’, going after lessons that are not just learned by individuals but become embedded in institutional procedures, maps, and codes of conducts.



Fig. 3 – A co-design session during the second phase of the Simeto SNAI process.

5 Conclusions

Our Simeto experience provides some insights on the challenge of collaboration between public institutions and the active part of their constituency in the development of inner regions. Such a collaboration is the bone of the Simeto SNAI Strategy but has, so far, remained on paper. Beside the bureaucratic obstacles faced by the SNAI in the entire Sicilian Region, there are clear obstacles at the local level related to institutional awareness and readiness to such a collaborative approach, despite the significant willingness of community activists to be helpful.

Through action-research, Simeto activists have slowly developed a sharp understanding of local public institutions as ‘commons’ (Donolo 1997) and a willingness to genuinely collaborate with them: the community push for the Simeto River Agreement, first, and, then, the central role played by the Presidium in the development of the Simeto SNAI Strategy show a widespread interest and ability not

only to monitor administrators' behaviors but also to provide direct support for those public decisions recognized as the outcome of transparent processes for the public interest. Simeto activists have always used conflict and protest as a way to engage their administrators in highly constructive (and productive!) conversations. They have re-discovered the importance of their public institutions and they want to make them accountable for what they are supposed to do. They also pretend administrators to act transparently and consistently with the papers they sign. In other words, this process has generated a significant 'civic growth' amongst the activists; a growth, however, that does not have a comparable counterpart within City Hall. Civic organizations have had the opportunity to experience a long process of collective learning. Public institutions have not had the same opportunity.

This lesson we think is relevant for the planning debate, characterized by clear ideas on the need to 'help people's individual capabilities' (Nussbaum, 2011) and a significant focus on how to engage, support, and facilitate the grassroots (Goodman, 1971; Fisher & Forester 1993, Innes & Booher 1999, etc.). We believe it is time to pay the same amount of attention and reflection to the institutional front. How do you go from individual to institutional learning on how to engage people in co-design and co-production for development? This seems a priority question not only for inner areas but for all the shrinking places where development actions are urgent and resources (in and out city hall) are scarce. Our work does not provide an answer, but identifies the opportunity to have 'institutions' going through a real 'action-research' treatment: the long-term direct engagement of elected and appointed public officials in learning and action-research cycles, with direct inputs on public procedures, rules, maps, codes, etc. This requires overcoming the dichotomy between:

- on the one side, those asking for a stronger public sector and more resources for public offices. In the Simeto Valley, more resources would be important only if officials learn how to use them differently and collaboratively;
- on the other side, those who don't believe in City hall and ask for a transfer of responsibilities toward the private and the non-profit sector; in the Simeto experience, the community innovators are the first ones advocating for strengthening public actors, refusing to take more responsibility over welfare.

In our case, the scarcity of municipal resources at hand would not be an obstacle for the implementation of the Simeto SNAI Strategy, if public institutions are given the opportunity to genuinely learn how to collaborate with community organizations. The Simeto River Agreement and the SNAI strategy both contain potential collaborative solutions to many developmental issues that still need to be tested through practice. The fact that local administrators have not 'paid attention' to the content of the very documents they have endorsed, means that something is not right. The Simeto action-research process needs a new cycle, this time with administrators and public officials as main co-researchers.

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